National Myth, Transnational Memory: Ondaatje's Archival Method

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Michael Ondaatje's oeuvre bears a fascinating if fraught relationship to the genre of the historical novel. His early works—for example, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming through Slaughter* (1976)—seek to retrace the lives of historical figures, while his most widely read novels, *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil's Ghost* (2000), unfold amid the conflicts of World War II and the Sri Lankan civil war. Beyond their subject matter, Ondaatje's novels reflect upon history as a mode of writing and a pattern of assembly. Their trademark paratactic style depends on the aesthetics of the fragment, eschewing representations of history as either an impersonal social force or a recoverable totality. Arguably, the most concentrated metonym of Ondaatje's ambivalently historical vision comes from *The English Patient*. It is a copy of Herodotus's *The Histories*, which the protagonist, Almásy, transforms into a personal archive by superimposing passages from other works, ephemera, and handwritten notes of his own desert adventures over parts of Herodotus's text. Ondaatje uses the conceit of *The Histories*-turned-scrapbook to reverse the conventional order of archive and history, a maneuver that transforms a closed book into an open one. Indebted as we are to the work of early Michel Foucault and late Jacques Derrida, we have grown accustomed to defining the archive as preceding and determining any possible history. Ondaatje's novels show us something else: that historical narratives might also regenerate into new archives.[1]

Almásy's individualized copy of *The Histories* encapsulates what is both exciting and distressing about Ondaatje's literary treatment of history. In transforming *The Histories* from a finished narrative into an expanding archive, Ondaatje suggests that history, like modernity, is an unfinished project and, more importantly, an unstable genre—one that will bear the imprint of personal experience, desire, and apocrypha. When Almásy turns *The Histories* into an archive of his desert adventures, he reveals his romantic self-indulgence, not his explorer's expertise—an indulgence that some critics have argued afflicts Ondaatje as well. A recurring critique of Ondaatje is that he takes on historical topics without a historicist's eye, expressing nostalgia for the past without adequate sensitivity to the dynamics of causality and continuity that link the past to the present.[2] In this essay, I agree

[1] The most influential theorists of the archive in the past fifty years have been Foucault and Derrida, both of whom have described it as an architecture of control. Foucault seminally defined the archive as "first the law of what can be said . . . [it] defines at the outset *the system of* [a statement's] *enunciability*" (*Archaeology* 129; emphasis in original). Such singular enunciations are always to be disrupted in Derrida's philosophy, but he too begins his theoretical foray into the archive with an emphasis on authority—on its etymological root, *arkhe*, which denotes both commencement and commandment (1–5).

[2] See, for example, Arun Mukherjee, Qadri Ismael, and Tom LeClair; I discuss the latter two in more detail later in the essay. Bruce Robbins presents an important recuperative reading of *The*

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that Ondaatje does indeed walk a fine line between romanticizing and realistically portraying the past; however, I also argue that his work walks this line in order to critique nostalgia rather than promote it, particularly when nostalgia for the past takes the form of nostalgia for the nation. Ondaatje's novels cultivate the symbolism of symbolic landscapes, like Almásy's "half-invented" (150) desert but also the American West of Billy the Kid and the sacred sites turned killing fields of Sri Lanka, as a way of exploring the interface between myth and history. These discourses, which typically help to define the nation by creating a shared sense of the past, perform the opposite function in Ondaatje's work: they take sharing beyond the comfortable space of a bounded tradition into the wider and more diffuse networks of global collectivity.

The transnationally shared pasts that Ondaatje's novels explore are made possible by what I call his archival method.[3] Ondaatje develops an aesthetics and philosophy of the archive that magnify the instabilities of history, myth, and memory that Almásy's scrapbooking connotes at a metaphoric level. Where Almásy turns a historical text into an archival book, Ondaatje's archival novels also display strategies that give them an open-ended, unsynthesized, and shape-shifting quality. They use the archive as structure and style not so much to demystify the ideological structures of the nation or its icons but to immerse them in a proliferation of new materials, contexts, and technologies of meaning making that break down the very boundaries that national myths shore up. In this sense, Ondaatje's novels certainly deviate from the classical function of the historical novel that Georg Lukács called "the awakening of national sensibility" (25); but perhaps more surprisingly, they also exceed the label of historiographical metafiction (Hutcheon 105–24) that has long designated them. Where this postmodern category helps to explain the self-consciousness of Ondaatje's novels about the narrative dimensions of history, it does not address their aesthetic investment in the proliferation or materiality of artifacts. Nor does it speak to their interest in those not always textual traces of memory that remain invisible within the discourses of history and thus stand in oblique relation to the real. In this respect, Ondaatje's novels present a version of the archive that is not entirely wedded to the historical and can be affectively confounding—a version reminiscent of Foucault's re-encounter with the archive in his late work "The Lives of Infamous Men."

If the Foucault of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* gives us a theory of the archive as a system that determines all forms of enunciation, the Foucault of "The Lives of Infamous Men" describes an actual archive that evades enunciation. In the essay, Foucault recalls a set of prison records in the Bibliothèque Nationale that contains snatches of obscure lives whose only recognition came from encounters with power. Foucault refers to these records as "strange poems" (76) whose intensity derives precisely from the archival forms in which he first read and experienced

English Patient that notes that the novel acknowledges Almásy's historical erasures in a way that the character does not, evidenced partly by the novel's allusion to the "half-invented world of the desert" that Almásy inhabits (Ondaatje, *English Patient* 150, qtd. in Robbins 166).

3 One point of reference here is Joseph Conrad, who famously described his artistic approach as an "ironic method" (251).

them. The essay becomes a meditation on how to represent these lives in a way that preserves their affective force; in the process he arrives at the genre of the legend. According to Foucault, legends are defined by "a certain equivocation of the fictitious and the real" (80). Though a legend often emerges from a surplus of stories that raise a historically real person to the level of myth, it may also derive from the opposite situation, in which the absence of information about a life effectively derealizes it, relegating (as opposed to elevating) it to the status of myth. The archive thus becomes a space from which legends might emerge alongside histories, and it is in this respect also, I am claiming, that Ondaatje's archival method differentiates his work from the historical novel in its realist and metafictional modes. It is precisely because Ondaatje is as interested in mythography as in historiography that his novels are able to dissect the stories that nations tell to define themselves not just as communities evolving over time but as communities that derive character, shape, and purpose from a particular understanding and performance of their origins.

In this essay, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*[4] and *Anil's Ghost* serve to exemplify Ondaatje's archival method as it develops around two very different kinds of national legends: the historical figure William Bonney turned mythical antihero Billy the Kid and the skeleton Sailor—an unidentified victim of state terror who comes to represent the "unhistorical dead" of Sri Lanka's civil war. These legends, the former in the conventional sense of an embellished identity, the latter in the obscure sense of Foucault's infamous men, become flashpoints of collective definition for both novels as they reinscribe American and Sri Lankan national pasts within networks of transnational memory. In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje transforms Billy from a national icon to a global one, working against the imperialist strains of frontier mythology and contemporary nativist strains of cultural propriety to present a mythology of the Wild West that arises from beyond an American discourse of national character. In turn, in *Anil's Ghost*, Sailor becomes the center of debates about how to read and rectify Sri Lankan war crimes—by seeking justice in the legal-historical realm or by pursuing national reconstruction through the renovation of communal myths. The novel balances the struggles of the former path with the limitations of the latter, contextualizing the search for Sailor's identity within a larger meditation on the discourses of history, myth, and artistry that the novel's characters use to name him and to imagine Sri Lankan reconstruction in the wake of civil war. Taking both novels together, we observe Ondaatje elaborating collective pasts that move outward across multiple traditions rather than simply moving backward within a single tradition. At a formal level, his archival method thus disturbs the sense of national cohesion that classic versions of the historical

4 Hereafter referred to as *Collected Works*. I will be drawing on both the 1970 and the expanded 2008 editions of this work. The contemporary edition contains important changes from the previous editions, including a new afterword by Ondaatje and a new cover that, I will argue, make explicit the work's transnational politics. My decision to privilege this edition of *Collected Works* draws on Ondaatje's involvement in extending it but also on theories of the "fluid text" by John Bryant and of "transmission" by Andrew Piper, both of whom have established the importance of publication history, revision, and reprinting to the interpretation of a work as both text and object.

novel helped to foster. At a historical and an ethical level, such disturbances pivotally adapt the genre to the global age by asking us to decouple our sense of what constitutes a collective past—and by extension a shared future—from a bounded communal form.

Archiving Frontiers: The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

Ondaatje's rendition of the outlaw Bonney, aka Billy the Kid, tests national mythologies by taking the defining narrative of American (that is to say US) self-identity, the frontier, and subjecting it to transnational reinvention and critique. Ann Mandel described the Canadian reception of *Collected Works* as "praised by critics and readers and roundly condemned—to [Ondaatje's] delight—by federal MPs for dealing with an *American* hero and outlaw" (276; emphasis in original). Ondaatje's afterword to the new edition of *Collected Works*, published in 2008, echoes Mandel's earlier assessment but with respect to his reception in the United States: "I couldn't afford to go south [to the United States to write in the 1960s] so it was an eventual delight when a review of the book in a Texas newspaper a few years later complained that a Canadian had been allowed to edit the journals of Billy the Kid" (115). Ondaatje's pleasure is twofold: he appreciates that his work has been mistaken for Bonney's actual journals, blurring the line between primary source and secondary fiction;[5] yet he seems even more satisfied with the way that his work's archival mode, in suggesting editorship over authorship, defies notions of national propriety and thematic appropriateness on both sides of the Canadian-US border. In fact, the "Canadian" Ondaatje, who was born in Sri Lanka and moved to England at age nine and to Canada at nineteen (eight years before *Collected Works* was first published), uses the very American iconicity of Billy the Kid to counter nativism of the sort that permeated some of his book's reviews and, more significantly, to rewrite the frontier mythology that had become so crucial to narratives of American character. The legend of Billy the Kid, of course, is inseparable from the cultural creation of the American West, a category that had begun to take on mythic status as early as 1893 with Frederick Jackson Turner's address, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The frontier thesis, as is well known, shifted the foundation of US identity away from the Atlantic world toward the "Great West," where the conjuncture of "savagery and civilization" (Turner 32) gave rise to peculiarly American qualities of individuality, ingenuity, and ruggedness. Turner's thesis devalued European influence in favor of frontier transactions just as the actual frontier was closing down, making an imagined frontier central to his narrative of American history and laying the foundation for historical and popular perceptions of American identity as self-contained and even exceptional.[6]

5 For clarity I use the name Bonney when referring to the historical figure and Billy or Billy the Kid when referring to Ondaatje's character.

6 Thomas Bender makes a revisionist claim for Turner, who, he asserts, was not as "trapped in his rhetoric" of American self-containment as those he influenced (4). He invokes an earlier essay titled "The Significance of History," in which Turner writes of European history as refusing

In *Collected Works*, Ondaatje reimagines frontier mythology not by debunking it, as many twentieth-century historians and novelists have done, but by using it to counter notions of American isolation that could be said to begin with the frontier thesis. He does this by mixing archival materials that have helped produce Billy the Kid as an American icon with Ondaatje's own poetry, prose, and photographs, which disperse constructions of the "Wild West" beyond the United States. The form of *Collected Works* is thus remarkably unclassifiable. It is told from both an omniscient perspective and Billy's own, taking us through the last year of Billy's life, from his initial skirmishes with the sheriff Pat Garrett to his arrest, escape, and eventual death at Garrett's hands. Yet it also incorporates newspaper articles, interviews, excerpts from pulp novels, and popular historical accounts of Bonney's exploits that remind us that "Billy" is a discursive creation as well. Ondaatje's assembly of these documentary and entertainment artifacts allows him to defamiliarize Billy's legend by experimenting with the very genres that have familiarized him to a global audience. As Lee Spinks has noted, "[W]e think we *know* the story before we *read* the story" (50). Like Spinks, I would suggest that Ondaatje is referencing "our . . . imaginative investment in Billy's historical drama" (50) when he creates an archive of Billy narratives; but unlike Spinks, I would also argue that *Collected Works* reflects upon the question of who that "our" is, particularly when it dissociates Billy from the distinctive Americanness that his legacy helped to produce.

Ondaatje uses several primary source texts in *Collected Works*, but the plot leading from Billy's first shoot-out with Garrett to his assassination is largely drawn from Walter Noble Burns's *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926). Ondaatje's choice of this best seller, more romance than history, reinforces his investment in the West as a mythology, and his passages from Billy's point of view recreate the atmospheric conventions of the western. Billy's first words are "These are the killed" (2), which becomes a dramatic refrain threading through his recitation of those he killed and those who would be killed by his nemesis, Garrett. Billy's closing line in this passage, "Blood a necklace on me all my life" (2), establishes the mythology of the West, translating its violence and the litany of the killed into the metaphysical beauty of a landscape that never quite seems real. Such lines do not aspire to history, though the list is based on historical record. What they do instead is capture the West as it has been dramatized by writers like Burns who transformed the skirmishes between outlaws and authorities in New Mexico and Texas into a potent cultural fantasy of American identity.

Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy the Kid emphasizes Billy's awareness of his legacy within that national formation, an awareness that oscillates between self-aggrandizement and self-dissection. By allowing Billy to reflect, proleptically, upon his future inscriptions within the numerous genres that fill *Collected Works*, Ondaatje disrupts the narrative's temporal unities precisely at moments in which his protagonist expands the spatial coordinates of American mythology beyond the United States. This formal strategy, which interrupts what Benedict Anderson has

"the bounds of a nation" (qtd. in Bender 4) in order to draw a historical precedent for transnational awareness among American historians.

called the "meanwhile" (25) of the realist novel's imagined community, becomes a mechanism for reimagining frontier mythology as transnational movement:

> *Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in. Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning.* (17)

In this passage we witness Billy's disputing his placement within the origin story of the United States by erasing the United States from his consciously oppositional search for self-definition. His evocation of a beginning is unusual for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that it is studded by pairs. These pairs eschew the certainty of a single point of origin, instead building a "maze" of visual and sonic echoes ("begin, be in"; "two years ago"; "two of us"; "ten miles north . . . ten miles south"; "criss-cross"; "rising and falling"). Ondaatje's insistent doubling, the symmetry of these phrases, generates a rare tranquillity in Billy's voice as it refracts national unities of time and space through a continental criss-cross in which Canada and Mexico become sites of "beginning" as well. I am not suggesting that the tranquillity of this passage is a sign of Billy's personal cosmopolitanism; rather, Ondaatje's deviation into an almost pastoral mode accompanies the expansion of American terrain from the national to the continental scale. In acknowledging this wider geography beneath the moniker "American," the passage dissociates Billy's self-consciousness from the history of consciousness that underlay frontier mythology's imperial forms. Instead, the vectored motion of westward expansion dissolves beneath Billy's and Charlie's shifting geometry, their criss-cross, their symmetry, and finally their narrowing radius that draws together Canada and Mexico within the gentle sway of their whip.

It is important that Billy betrays a certain lack of faith in his recollection ("That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know"), but I would argue that this stance is part of how the transnational American scene changes the performance of beginnings. Neither Billy nor Ondaatje aims to replace a national origin myth with a continental one; instead, the passage casts about for ways of remembering that disregard the impulse to originality in the writing of both individual and collective selves. Although the character of Billy begins by disavowing the legend of Billy the Kid, *Collected Works* clearly makes its critique of national origins through Billy's ever-growing archival afterlife—an afterlife that swerves beyond the expected sites and sources. The text's opening page flaunts this point by introducing readers to a photographic outline with no picture within, followed by a passage excerpted from *Huffman, Frontier Photographer*, stating, "*I send you a picture of Billy made from a Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked—Pyro and soda developer*" (1). Ondaatje plays here with mimetic representation, progressive temporality, and structures of address, denying us an image of Billy taken

by his contemporary, L. A. Huffman (others of whose photographs are allowed to populate the book), in order to suggest that it is the partial blankness of the past that provides the occasion and opportunity of the present. The empty photographic frame visually conveys a withholding of origins, and that withholding mediates between the highly localized Huffman gloss and the globalized future that the novel's archive will open through less direct and more diverse forms of mimesis than a historicized photographic portrait.

As *Collected Works* proceeds, its amassed artifacts absorb Billy's character into the mythologies of the frontier. Interspersed interviews with Sally Chisum (daughter of John Chisum, a cattle baron and Billy's foe) and Billy's lover, Paulita Maxwell, depict him as a gentleman, always meticulously attired ("*As far as dress was concerned/he always looked as if/he had just stepped out of a bandbox*" [91]), while Billy's first-person passages graphically capture the violence he witnessed ("Jesus I never knew that did you/the nerves shot out/the liver running around there . . ." [8]). The colloquy of these voices captures the classic antinomies of the frontier—the encounter between savagery and civility, to recall Turner—in the emergence of Billy as the archetypal outlaw. An excerpt from an actual pulp novel, titled *Billy the Kid and the Princess*, and a fabricated interview with Billy in the *Texas Star* further bridge the production of his image to the modern-day culture industry, particularly when Billy anachronistically mentions a "Mr. Cassavetes" upon being asked how he will be remembered (88).[7] Such genre mixing culminates in a final photograph, this time a picture of Ondaatje himself as a young boy in a garish cowboy costume (see figure 1) that wryly recalls the empty photographic frame of the first page. Comparing these images suggests the extent to which Billy's legend has grown through the circulation of mass culture, but it also blurs the line between reception and production as the author takes his place within the narrative he has crafted.

By including a picture of himself within *Collected Works*, Ondaatje could be read as making a classically postmodern gesture of self-reference. Still, rather than treat this moment as a metafictional disruption, I want to focus on the transnational location of the photograph, a question raised in the 2008 edition of *Collected Works*. In a new afterword that immediately follows the photograph, Ondaatje recalls his childhood love of westerns:

> *I had an obsession with westerns since I was eight or nine—for even in Sri Lanka the myth of the American West had filtered down furtively among children in Colombo. I had a cowboy suit, with blatantly cheap-looking glass "jewels" on my cowboy belt as well as little leather holders for one's bullets, which always seemed to me to be a fey and fussy method of transporting bullets that would later be used to kill a mule or a woman or a sheriff. So, when our house in Boralesgamuwa was robbed, I was glad to see that the jewelled cowboy belt was also stolen, only to be returned by the police several months later.* (113)

[7] Actually, it was Paul Newman who played Billy in *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958), possibly the film to which Ondaatje is referring. John Cassavetes played a violent young gunman in the western *Saddle the Wind*, also released in 1958.

Figure 1 Michael Ondaatje. Author photo © 1970 by Michael Ondaatje. Reproduced by permission of Michael Ondaatje

In evoking his past, Ondaatje's afterword ends up describing the picture in the main text, explicitly introducing a Sri Lankan context for the frontier mythology—a context that, in the earlier edition, might only have been guessed at. Add this to the Canadian context of production that Ondaatje invokes later in the afterword, and we see that the later edition of *Collected Works* demands not a return to postmodern understandings of decontextualization but a consideration of the multiple contexts that arise from the transnational circulation of western imagery. Arjun Appadurai has suggested that theorizing globalization provokes a renewed engagement with the idea of context defined not just as an explanatory ground but as a generator of new kinds of production (184). Contexts are dynamic in this sense, whether assimilating an object or place or defamiliarizing it, particularly when supposedly distant or deterritorialized contexts (like Sri Lanka as a site for cowboy culture) exert pressure on the object's definition. Though speaking of context from within the discipline of anthropology, Appadurai's insights are relevant to *Collected Works*, whose contextual moments serve an ethos of defamiliarization but not demystification.

To be sure, Ondaatje's afterword contextualizes his work in explanatory ways that add to the value of *Collected Works*, but his archival method also allows for the afterword to be part of the work—another artifact in the collection of Billy the Kid, the form of which expands and alters to take on new implications with the newest edition (2008). To read the afterword as blurring the line between context and

artifact is, to borrow a phrase from Ann Laura Stoler, to read along the archival grain.[8] Such a form ensures that Billy's legibility will always be partial, and accordingly it creates the conditions of his mystery—intensifying his legend—as more documents emerge. The cover of the 2008 edition of *Collected Works* illustrates my claim by bringing new artifacts of Bonney's afterlife into the structure of his literary representation (see figure 2). Where previous editions had featured portraits of Billy on their covers (a choice that reduced the power of the blank photograph in the main text), the 2008 edition features a photograph of two Mexican actors portraying Billy the Kid and Garrett.[9] This extra layer of mediation (a photograph of a cross-racial performance) amplifies the relationship between artifice and artifact established throughout the rest of the work. In doing so, the cover adds yet another context (or "maze," to recall Ondaatje's image) from which Billy can "begin, be in."

The form of *Collected Works* is thus open, leaving room for the possibility that more artifacts, more genres, and (with them) more contexts would and should be added to its creation of Billy. Notably, Ondaatje's choices of proliferation—the Sri Lanka anecdote and the Mexican performers—vivifies a method that does not just dig deeper but moves outward in an inversion of the expansionist credo embedded within frontier mythology. What makes the 2008 edition of *Collected Works* so interesting is the way its archival accumulations tie into a transnational theory of reception and production, multiplying the contexts of Billy's emergence in order to change the collective interests that frontier mythology serves. It follows that *Collected Works* (2008) offers something stronger than the claim that the American West "filtered down" into Colombo or, for that matter, across to Mexico. The American West was being produced in these places. *Collected Works* thus counters notions of cultural propriety and enclosure, not by demystifying the frontier as a locale of American identity and mythology but by opening up that locale to more agents of myth and memory beyond the United States.

The Unhistorical Dead: *Anil's Ghost*

If the archival form of *Collected Works* widens the geography of familiar, even iconic stories, changing them in the process, *Anil's Ghost* reanimates that form to tell stories of the "disappeared"—or more precisely, to tell stories that capture the complexities of representing the disappeared when the written archive is

[8] Stoler uses this phrase in reference to the Dutch colonial archives whose organization, she argues, reflects not the absolute control of an imperial government but the anxieties attendant to maintaining its power. Reading along the archival grain in her work, and in this essay, demands tracing the active process by which categories and facts change.

[9] The 2008 cover photograph, taken in 1930, is from the archive of Romualdo Garcia, an early pioneer of Mexican photography in the nineteenth century and a contemporary to Bonney and Huffman. Previous editions that featured historical photographs of Bonney include the 1997 edition of *Collected Works*, released by Anansi Press (the original publishers in 1970); the Vintage 1996 edition; and the Bloomsbury 2004 edition. The Norton 1974 edition features the title of the work with no photographs, and the first Anansi edition features an image of a man on a horse, though not Bonney.

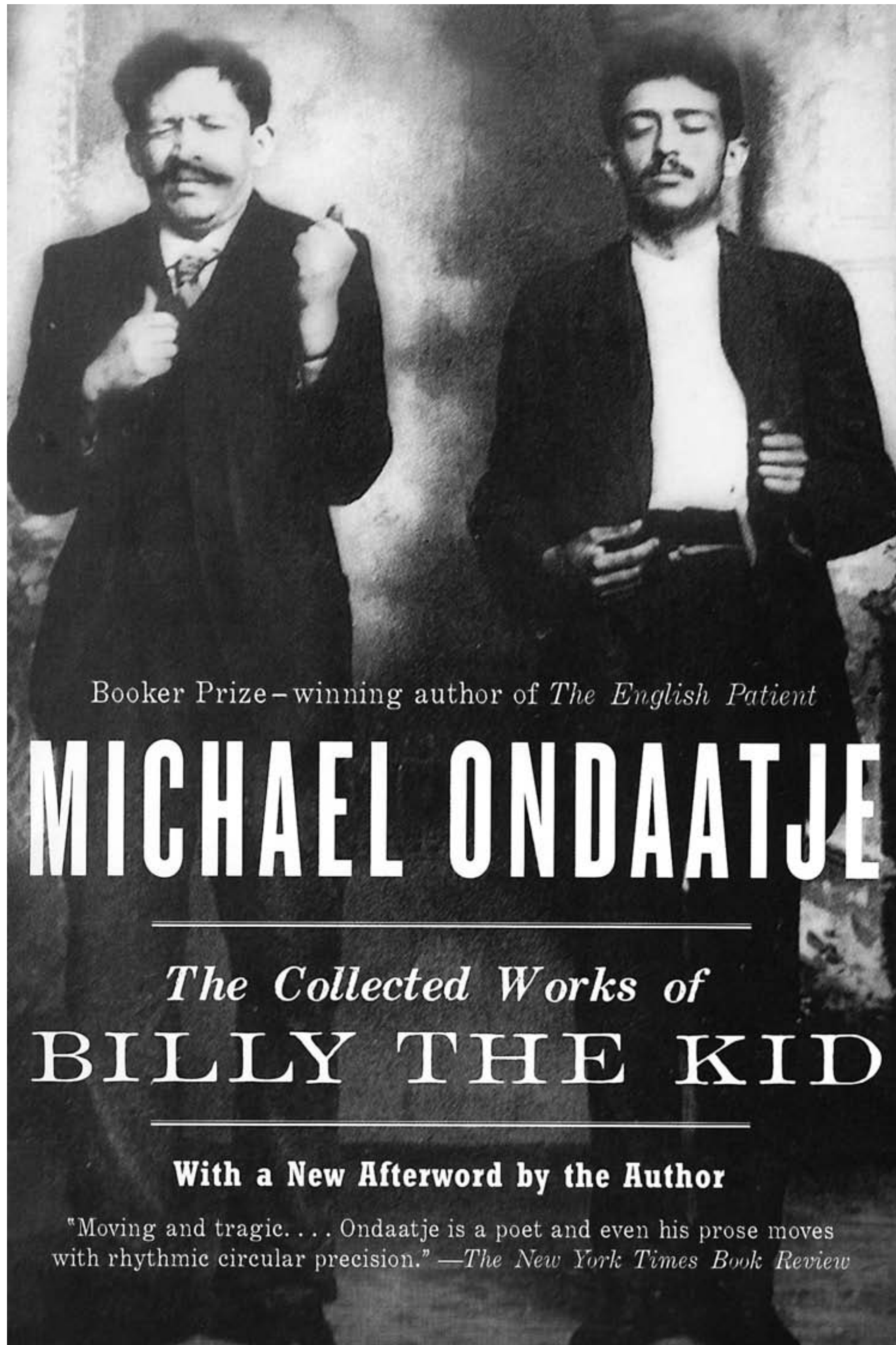

Figure 2 Cover for the 2008 edition of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Reproduced by permission of Knopf Canada

painfully thin. The novel unfolds in Sri Lanka during the 1980s and 1990s, when the nation was riven by a Sinhalese majority government and a Tamil insurgency that was itself split between separatists fighting for a Tamil state and those fighting for better representation within the Sri Lankan state.[10] The plot revolves around Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan expatriate and forensic anthropologist working for an international human rights organization. Her mission to investigate human rights abuses takes shape through her discovery of a skeleton she names Sailor. Anil finds Sailor in the "sacred historical site" of Bandarawela (52), a government-restricted zone that leads her to conclude that the state had been using centuries-old ruins to camouflage its modern-day killings. With the help of partners on the ground—an archaeologist named Sarath Diyasena and a local artist by the name of Ananda—Anil sets out to identify Sailor as the victim of state-sponsored terror under the somewhat naive conviction that her findings will compel state accountability and ultimately secure justice for its victims. The novel's politics, however, quickly veer away from the global law-and-order scenario of Anil's imagination. Instead, *Anil's Ghost* develops into a narrative that questions the efficacy of its protagonist's ideals by diverting the main plot of historical recovery and global justice through subplots that frame the contemporary Sri Lankan conflict within the distant pasts of Buddhist, Chinese, and other civilizations.

To summarize *Anil's Ghost* is to evoke a novel that could not seem more different from *Collected Works* in theme and setting. Where *Collected Works* reflected upon the legends that arise both from a surplus of information and in the name of a powerful nation, *Anil's Ghost* concentrates on the crucial absence of information, on lives like Sailor's that were "disappeared" by the state and that come to represent national disintegration as opposed to national wholeness. While Ondaatje distributes Billy across several transnational geographies to contest the time/space unities of Americanness, he uses Sailor to evaluate responses to national fracture from both globalist and localist perspectives. The globalist sutures collective memory to the universal category of the human, while the localist brings it back into an enclosed narrative of the nation. Neither response constitutes an adequate solution, leading the novel into a meditation on the work that memory does and on the criteria of relevance that separate myth from history as well as one group from another. These questions require Ondaatje to thematize the archival as well as to stylize it; the novel productively expands the definition of *archive* to include archaeological sites, Sailor's bones, and Buddhist statues—each of which contextualizes "the here and now" of the civil war within several other histories and geographies of destructive memory loss.

Ondaatje's compilation of these disparate pasts and his paratactic way of arranging them became especially controversial with the release of this novel, as some

[10] The war did not come to an official end until 2004, after the novel was published. Ondaatje's handling of the details of this protracted conflict has been criticized by those who felt that in broaching a historical conflict, *Anil's Ghost* should have been more straightforwardly factual and even equitable in its presentation of Sinhalese and Tamil characters (Ismail 27). For readings that defend the novel from these criticisms, see, respectively, Marlene Goldman, John McClure, and Katherine Stanton.

critics claimed he took too much aesthetic license with the real lives lost during the turmoil.[11] Yet I would suggest that Ondaatje's archival method expresses the conditions of incompleteness and unknowing that the war induced, and in doing so it uses Sailor as a Foucauldian "legend" to open up larger philosophical questions about the limits of responsible representation in the name of either national recovery or global justice. Like *Collected Works*, *Anil's Ghost* does not develop an archive that will set the historical record straight by supplying the "right" information; rather, it uses a variety of traces, documents, and artifacts to wed collective memory to the destabilization of identity categories.[12]

The most powerful meditations on historical relevance come in the company of Sailor, as Ondaatje situates Anil's rigorously empirical task of forensic identification within a narrative of her more "tender" discoveries, which merit quoting at length:

> *She loosened the swaddling plastic that covered Sailor. In her work Anil turned bodies into representatives of race and age and place, though for her the tenderest of all discoveries was the finding, some years earlier, of the tracks at Laetoli—almost-four-million-year-old footsteps of a pig, a hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird, this strange ensemble identified by a twentieth-century tracker. Four unrelated creatures that had walked hurriedly over a wet layer of volcanic ash. To get away from what? Historically more significant were other tracks in the vicinity, of a hominid assumed to be approximately five feet tall (one could tell by the pivoting heel impressions). But it was that quartet of animals walking from Laetoli four million years ago that she liked to think about.*
>
> *The most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization. She knew that. Pompeii. Laetoli. Hiroshima. Vesuvius (whose fumes had asphyxiated poor Pliny while he recorded its "tumultuous behaviour"). Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives.* (55)

There is a tendency in the critical literature on *Anil's Ghost* to define Anil as limited by her rigid empiricism. While that may well be true, this rarely discussed passage illustrates a character who is not entirely in thrall to the norms of science or history. Anil is sentimentally attuned to what historical standards of significance leave out and what they cannot answer—namely, how irregular collectives form in the midst of crisis and how the circumstances of such relations might have as much to offer as the empirically deducible precisely because of their inaccessibil-

[11] LeClair writes, "Ondaatje should distrust himself. Now I don't trust his collage method. It's a way to avoid banal 'old coin' cause and effect, the logic by which human rights are denied or defended" (32–33). Spinks, though more favorably disposed to the novel, also criticizes formal elements of Ondaatje's work that "deny the specificity" (230) of the Sri Lankan civil war.

[12] Here my work has been enriched by Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, which has shown how the boundaries of memory rarely parallel the boundaries of group identity (1–29).

ity to empirical analysis. Here, the archives left by disaster conjure effects that are powerful for their brevity and inarticulateness—a set of records that, like Foucault's strange poems of infamous men, hide more than they reveal.

If this passage is about Anil's affective response to ancient remains, it is also about removing Sailor from his swaddling plastic and placing him in a narrative that is neither entirely historical nor entirely mythical. Anil's work demands that she turn "bodies into representatives of race and age and place," creating the legible evidence that public justice demands. However, the movement of this passage sets such fictions of legibility next to a catalog of disasters that, in generating so much empirical detail, seem only to retreat farther from historical comprehension. Pompeii, Hiroshima, Vesuvius, and specifically Laetoli in Tanzania form nodes on a global circuit that Ondaatje uses to preserve unexplained elements within the "most precisely recorded moments of history." If contextualizing Sailor within this world geography of remains risks minimizing the here-and-now of his murder in Sri Lanka, it does so in an attempt to capture a larger range of possibility for making sense of that nation's "unhistorical lives."

Although Anil's anthropological background leads her to enlarge the scale at which memory is conceived, her forensic mission does not allow her to reevaluate the way history is told. Anil cleaves closely to human rights dicta in the novel and believes that retrieving Sailor from the "unhistorical dead" requires naming him: "This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (56).[13] The novel, however, invites deep criticism of this metonymic ethos and of the adequacy of restitution that it implies. The novel unravels Anil's mission by allowing it to succeed in its immediate ends—Anil does indeed identify Sailor's bones as the body of a "real" person, Ruwan Kumara—but then denies the identification any positive force when Anil meets a panel of Sri Lankan officials who refuse to ratify her findings.

Sailor's continued illegibility, even after Anil restores him to history as Kumara, illustrates what the novel calls, via Sarath, "the archaeological surround of a fact" (44). For Sarath, this surround refers immediately to the political climate of Sri Lanka, in which Anil's attempts to speak truth to power are not so much brave as acutely unaware of the truth's inefficacy for those who live under an authoritarian regime. With such salutary reminders, Sarath's seems like the voice closest to Ondaatje's in the novel. Yet his politics should not be taken for the novel's, especially when his demand for context leads him to find in the past only a form of aesthetic escapism. We see this most vividly in his debate with Anil, when he describes excavating remnants from a fifth century BC Chinese civilization and finding twenty female musicians killed in a ritual ceremony with their instruments (mainly bells) alongside them. These musicians were servants of an "ancient ruler" who, upon his death, wanted the women to accompany him into the next world (260). While Sarath recalls the beauty of those bells as solidifying his sense of vocation, Anil sees another site of violence:

13 For discussions of *Anil's Ghost* within the context of human rights, see Joseph R. Slaughter (185–98) and Manav Ratti.

> *"Possibly it was those bells that made me an archaeologist."*
> *"Twenty murdered women."*
> *"It was another world with its own value system that came to the surface."*
> *"Love me, love my orchestra. You can take it with you! That kind of madness lies within the structure of all civilizations, not just in distant cultures."* (261)

Sarath historicizes where Anil does not, and this time we are left to wonder if the voice of mindful contextualization might not also fall prey to an inert relativism. Sarath's appreciation of the artifacts, as Anil points out, is dependent on blindness to the value system that made their presence possible. His attitude to the past facilitates certain blind spots in the present—for example, the failure to see how the power structures of an ancient civilization might be not only comparable to modern societies but indeed still operative within them. Sarath's decision to separate his archaeological excavations from his ethical and political judgment prevents him from seeing proximities between the temporally "distant cultures" that he idealizes and those contemporary forms of nation-state sovereignty that also perpetrate violence against their citizens. Where Sarath sees in ancient China a world separated by history, Anil sees a mythical structure for Sri Lanka's self-cannibalization—a story that lends shape and order to the chaos of the present.

The novel's "archaeological surround of a fact" then compels us to weigh Sarath's claims for historical particularity against Anil's universalist criticism of him in the passage above. Neither side is perfect, and yet both deserve to be taken seriously. To do so is to arrive at something of a compromise: an investment in particularity but a hesitation to equate particularity with temporal and territorial boundedness. This is an oscillation that I think the novel bears out in the passages that give it its archival form. On unnumbered pages and italicized, these passages interrupt the diegetic narrative, sometimes relating a past event unknown to Ondaatje's main characters and at other times taking the form of a found object, such as a letter or record that a character (usually Anil) may have left behind or come across in the course of an investigation. The passages' visuality recalls the practices of collation and assembly that Ondaatje first used in *Collected Works*; as in that text, they serve to expand the geography into which the main plot of establishing Sailor's identity dissolves. To read these italicized passages together is to draw the Sri Lankan civil war into a transhistorical and transnational network of memory loss. Ondaatje draws comparisons between the Sri Lankan killing fields and a raided Buddhist temple in China's Shanxi province where Japanese archaeologists excised twenty-four Bodhisattva sculptures whose broken pieces sit in various museums in the West: "*This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off*" (12).[14] He includes a "found letter" from Anil to a Hollywood film director—an artifact of her life in Texas with her girlfriend Leaf who is suffering from Alzheimer's in the novel's present: "*We are forensic scientists and have been arguing about where on his body Mr. Marvin was shot*" (258). Still another passage takes the form of a partial record of Sri Lanka's disappeared:

[14] Since the pages on which the italicized passages appear are unnumbered in the novel, I have counted pages to provide page numbers in this paragraph.

> *Kumara Wijetunga, 17. 6th November 1989. At about 11:30 p.m. from his house. Prabath Kumara, 16. 17th November 1989. At 3:20 a.m. from the home of a friend. Kumara Arachchi, 16. 17th November 1989. At about midnight from his house.* (41)

The passage goes on to provide seven more names and then the following lines: "The colour of a shirt. The sarong's pattern. The hour of a disappearance" (41).

Sourced from *Amnesty International* reports, the passage purports to be a segment of the printed archive that Anil reads before discovering Sailor's "archive of bones."[15] These names, combined with the other extradiegetic passages in the novel, at one level suggest Benjaminian shards—pasts that defy assimilation into the narrative of historical continuity that Anil equates with justice and that Sarath considers unattainable under present conditions. At another level, these passages recall the comparative gestures made by Anil in her debate with Sarath and in her examination of Sailor through the prism of Laetoli, Vesuvius, and Hiroshima—those multiple sites of preservation and destruction that precede Sri Lanka's. Ondaatje's artifactual images—the Chinese temple, the Hollywood letter, and the record of the Sri Lankan missing—represent several incompatible orders of loss that the novel nonetheless asks us to consider together. Here, transnational memory leaves the reader in a messier ethical space than either Anil's mythos or Sarath's historicism, because unlike its characters' wont, the novel's archival form places Sailor within a network of locations from which no consistent narrative can be drawn. Anil's faith in universal truths (whether in the form of empirical facts, moral norms, or myths) and Sarath's commitment to relative ones lead them to tether Sailor's fate to recognizable collectivities—the legal community of the human for Anil and the failed nation-state for Sarath. Ondaatje's archives, however, make that tethering difficult or, more accurately, reveal its artificiality by linking together discrepant geographies of loss and allowing all sorts of remains—shards, bones, letters, and records—to retain their form and affective charge even as characters attempt to absorb them within politically meaningful narratives.

Anil's Ghost, then, actively resists returning Sailor to the "historical dead," which is why the novel is so frustrating to those who demand a materialist analysis of the Sri Lankan civil war rather than an aesthetics of its material remains and the inaccessibility of meaning that those remains come to signify. Ondaatje responds to the civil war—an event that seems to be nothing if not internal to the nation—by asserting that a larger and less uniform geography might be necessary to understand if not the course of a specific nation's violence, those experiences of violence that cannot be remembered, harnessed, and integrated within a historical narrative. The novel sacrifices causality and demystification within the national context in favor of correlation and comparison across transnational and transhistorical fields of violence in order to reveal those sites of memory that are erased beneath facticity. This is why when we finally learn Sailor's "real" identity—that is, when

[15] I borrow this phrase from Antoinette Burton, who uses it to place *Anil's Ghost* at the center of debates about postcolonial historiography and the relative merits of positivist history (as represented by forensic science in the novel) to other Western and non-Western modes of articulating historical truths.

Anil succeeds in turning the skeleton into Ruwan Kumara, a "representative of race and age and place"—the information is anticlimactic and quickly laid aside. The novel continues to refer to Kumara as Sailor even after Anil has made the skeleton a member of the "historical dead," and it continues to turn Sri Lanka's communal future away from broken state apparatuses to technologies of myth making that will address national fissures by appealing to older and wider kinds of collectivity.

The novel channels this commitment to myth into an ending that may be nostalgic, but not for the nation, and that opens up room for critique even as Ondaatje concludes with an allegorical image of national reconstruction. The final pages of *Anil's Ghost* feature Ananda restoring a vandalized and shattered statue of the Buddha in yet another sacred site that, supposedly "'neutral' and 'innocent,'" had become a killing field during the war (300). Throughout the novel, Ananda's artistic skills foil Anil's scientific ones; his first task—to construct a model of Sailor's face for identification purposes—foreshadows his final task of restoring the Buddha. Ananda's rendering of Sailor, we learn earlier in the novel, does not resemble any one person but is rather a projection of his grief at having lost his wife in the war: "He [Sarath] would already know as she [Anil] did that no one would recognize the face. It was not a reconstruction of Sailor's face they were looking at" (188). Ananda's first sculpture, then, reinforces Sailor's symbolic function within the novel as the icon of national fracture and collective trauma, a symbolism that his last sculpture, the Buddha, will attempt to both exorcize and memorialize: "The [Buddha's] eyes, like his [Ananda's] at this moment, would always look north. As would the great scarred face half a mile away, which he had helped knit together from damaged stone, a statue that was no longer a god, that no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found" (306–7). This passage embeds the national fissures of Sri Lanka in the Buddha's gaze north—a muted reference to the Tamil separatist region where the fighting had begun—and in the cracked face of the statue, which keeps alive the deformation of religious values under the majority Buddhist Sinhalese government.

The critical appeal of the reconstructed statue lies in the way it changes the object of nostalgia from the nation itself to the nation's now complex position within the transnational and even transhistorical net that Buddhism casts throughout the novel: in the stolen Bodhisattvas from Shanxi and in the sacred sites that, despite being contaminated by the Sri Lankan state, designate an affiliation that is both older than and irreducible to its nationalist corruption. It is tempting to say that the archival passages of *Anil's Ghost* and Sailor's archive of bones are resolved inside the scarred totality of the sculpture. This at least seems to be the vision that Ondaatje offers us by replacing Sailor with the Buddha as the novel's final image of social recovery. Still, I am less inclined to offer this reading as the culmination of an archival method that has taught us to question the very notion of completeness in the rendering of cultural memory.

The ending of *Anil's Ghost* becomes more provocative and less nostalgic when we consider that it is not the only one. The novel has rehearsed three different endings before it. In one, Anil leaves Sri Lanka contemplating her own place in the Western media's narcissistic narratives of heroism: "American movies, English

books—remember how they all end? . . . The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him" (285). Another takes the form of an encounter between Gamini (Sarath's brother) and Sarath's corpse after Sarath has been tortured and murdered for aiding Anil. The third and penultimate ending features a public riot in Sri Lanka in which the president is assassinated—perhaps the result of Anil's report, although the novel does not specify this. To read the novel as displaying, perhaps even archiving, several endings rather than settling for one recalls *Collected Works*, whose own sense of an ending was precisely unending. Where each artifact in that work promised to extend and disable Billy's concrete definition by generating continual reinterpretations, every ending in *Anil's Ghost* extends Sailor's reverberations over those who would form an interpretive community around him.[16]

Billy and Sailor thus take shape through the projections of their many authors and artifactual remains. Indeed, their importance to Ondaatje's transnational dissection of national mythologies depends precisely on their remaining legends, as opposed to becoming the historically real William Bonney and Ruwan Kumara. The archive as a formal paradigm enables Ondaatje to experiment with both the proliferation of cultural artifacts in the American context and the dearth of information in the Sri Lankan one, and further, it enables him to use the polarities of these cases to stage a larger examination of collective memory's relationship to the reproduction and breakdown of national communities. Where one would expect specific national identities to be shored up by a return to recognizable icons (the American outlaw of *Collected Works* and the Sri Lankan Buddha that replaces Sailor at the end of *Anil's Ghost*), Ondaatje's archival method changes the collectivity to be renewed and the grounds by which we might measure collectivity's legibility. It diverts national symbols through transnational geographies not only to expand the number of groups that may lay claim to them but also to trouble the boundaries among those groups. This strategy of reinscription is an important one for deciphering global collectivity, a formation in which many groups might be said to intersect with one another but cannot be said to cohere within any single model of identity or community. By defamiliarizing figures of nostalgia, Ondaatje begins the slow process of separating collective pasts from national paradigms and from the myths of origin, lineage, and belonging that they sustain.

L. P. Hartley famously wrote: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" (1). Ondaatje's archival method revives this striking metaphor of the strangeness of personal memory and transposes it to the domain of the social and the transnational, in the process literalizing it. *Collected Works* and *Anil's Ghost* show what national pasts might look like when formulated through foreign countries, reinterpreting the boundaries of cultural memory in response to the

16 This point is related to Slaughter's argument that the reason Anil's mission fails is that there is no "democratic public sphere" in Sri Lanka to form an interpretive community around Sailor and give his life legibility within the national context (190). Where I differ from Slaughter is in claiming that Anil's team illustrates a dysfunctional kind of interpretive community in which each member's adoption of a different interpretive tactic only intensifies Sailor's symbolic function within the novel.

demands of a cosmopolitan present. In so doing they reject the isolationism of cultural particularity, turning to archives in search of a perspective, beyond the historical, with which to define our contemporary moment as a global one.

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